

The University of Chicago

ATROCITY PROPAGANDA 1914-19

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE DIVISION OF THE
SOCIAL SCIENCES IN CANDIDACY FOR THE
DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY
JUNE, 1941

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CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

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PREFACE¹

Part VII of the treaty of Versailles provided for the trial of the Kaiser and other German "war criminals." The "crimes" fell into two general categories: responsibility for having caused the war, and responsibility for having committed atrocities in the war. This part of the treaty is important because, although it was the shortest section of that document, it was the first to be broken. It was also the part of the treaty which the Germans in 1919 apparently resented most and tried hardest to evade. Had it been eliminated the treaty would perhaps have been a more durable instrument; certainly the German protestations against a non-negotiated peace would have been slightly less formidable. The American delegation disapproved of the section and Wilson himself described it during the negotiations as "the weak spot of the treaty."

To understand how Part VII came into being, it is necessary to see how the propaganda of atrocities throughout the war led to the overpowering demand for punishment of "war criminals." The governments themselves fostered much of this propaganda, but the press coöperated willingly, as atrocities made good copy. Propaganda of atrocities might indeed be said to have contributed more than any other single factor to the making of a severe peace.

In this study the attempt has been made to trace the evolution of atrocity stories, and to analyze the validity of some of the outstanding examples. This involves a differentiation between atrocities and stories of atrocity. The former might be defined as: "an act of needless and calculated cruelty in war"; while the latter is best understood as "a report of needless cruelty, inspiring hatred of the enemy."

The general pattern of the work is indicated by the chapter headings. After certain general problems concerning this technique of propaganda have been considered in the first two chapters, the crucial period from the beginning of the war to the end of 1914

¹This thesis was published in 1941, with few changes, and under the same title, by the Yale Press.

is treated as a unit in the third chapter. The importance of the Belgian situation during that period is recognized by the fourth chapter, which might have been called, "What Really Happened in Belgium." The remaining chapters deal with events commencing in January, 1915, and discuss the literature of atrocities in Germany, France, and England respectively. The final chapter describes the attempt made at and after the peace conference of Paris to try the Kaiser and the other war criminals.

CHAPTER I

MOTIVES AND METHODS

Atrocity stories were used by both sides in different ways to inspire hatred of the enemy: (1) to steel the will of the soldiers and the people; (2) to promote the sale of war loans; (3) to encourage enlistments; (4) to justify further breaches of international law; (5) to rationalize the rejection of "premature" peace proposals; (6) to influence neutrals; (7) to excuse the imposition of severe terms of peace.

Almost all forms of expression were put to use in circulating the atrocity story. The worst stories were passed from mouth to mouth; some lecturers specialized in gory tales not fit to print. Pamphlets were issued by the millions, but their efficacy has been doubted. They probably did not convince any readers who were of another opinion, but for those already half-convinced that the enemy were monsters, they did yeoman service. The newspapers devoured atrocity stories because they made sensational reading. Pictures and cartoons were especially effective. The work of the Dutch cartoonist Raemaekers was invaluable to the Allied cause; his cartoons were useful even in Arabia. On the other hand a German doctor made public appeal for atrocity pictures, the collection of which would be "a flaming accusation; suitable to play a large role at the conclusion of peace."

CHAPTER II

MANUFACTURED GOODS

The war was replete with actual atrocities and they were committed by both sides. Notwithstanding, fewer actual atrocities were probably committed in the world war than the average reader of newspapers thought in 1919. Many of the atrocity stories were, in other words, simply invented. Again it must be emphasized that: (1) both sides indulged in inventions; (2) not every atrocity story

was invented; (3) usually not all of the atrocity story was invented. The latter is most important. The sins of omission were the most frequent. The propagandists were well aware of the fact that "good agency work is like good poker play; you cannot bluff on every hand." A core of truth was usually the best guarantee of the effectiveness of any series of atrocity stories. The result was that (1) isolated cases were treated as if they were typical of innumerable acts of cruelty; (2) the original act was embroidered and distorted into a more sensational tale; (3) causes of such acts, such as the interaction of reprisal, were altogether omitted from the stories.

Outstanding examples of the fabrication of atrocity stories can be definitely proved. The Allied accusations concerning the German practice of amputating children's hands and women's breasts, the use of human bodies to manufacture fat, and the crucifixion of soldiers are cases in point. The Germans on the other hand told absolutely unfounded tales of a similar nature about the Russians in East Prussia or accused Belgian civilians of gouging out the eyes of sleeping German soldiers.

CHAPTER III

ATROCITY OVERTURE

Both sides adopted the use of atrocity stories in the first fortnight of the war. The Belgians and the Germans began the practice almost simultaneously. The Belgians were the first to establish an official commission of investigation; all the other belligerents, including Germany and Austria, followed suit. The Belgian reports were filled with accounts of the most shocking crimes and perversities allegedly committed by the invading German troops. A comparison with the reports of the reorganized Belgian commission in 1922 shows, however, that the most serious charges were not founded on fact. This leads to the question: just how badly did the German army behave in Belgium in 1914?

CHAPTER IV

FRANCS-TIREURS?

Although it is now evident that neither the Germans nor the Belgians were guilty of systematic abnormalities, as charged at the time, wholesale massacres did take place. Perhaps five thousand Belgian civilians were killed by the German invaders. Many of these were executed in large groups as hostages. Some of the civilian hostages were even used as "shields" for the German troops, a practice directly contrary to international law. The Germans, asserting that such civilians were only guarantees that other civilians would not fire on their troops, disregarded the obvious possibility of encountering enemy troops. The Germans had a right by existing international law to take hostages, but were on more dubious grounds in executing them. Certainly the policy of mass executions was more than a crime; it was a mistake, especially when women and children were included (by accident, the Germans maintained).

The German defense of their actions was based on the assumption that they had to contend with an illegal "people's war" in Belgium. Francs-tireurs, or civilian snipers, were everywhere ambushing German troops, declared the White Books. The Belgians, on the other hand, swore that not a single franc-tireur was to be found in Belgium. In taking this stand the Belgians went too far: substantial evidence is available that there were some francs-tireurs. However, they were within their rights as defined by international law if (1) they were not in occupied territory; (2) they were not acting as individuals; (3) they carried their arms openly; (4) they obeyed the laws and regulations of war. Although many Belgians who offered resistance conformed to these obligations, they were nevertheless denied belligerent rights by the Germans. It is therefore evident that the German army, though not guilty of systematic and abnormal cruelties, did distinguish itself by excessive and unjustifiable ruthlessness in Belgium.

CHAPTER V

GREUEL!

A widespread misconception in Germany since 1919 was that Germans never stooped to anything so low as "atrocity propaganda." Conclusive evidence that the German government had no scruples against this kind of propaganda is to be found in the series of official German reports on atrocities, of which fifty were made from 1914 to 1919. Certain types of atrocity stories were indeed avoided out of the fear of demoralizing the civilian population. Good examples of this are seen in the failure to emphasize the ravaging effects of the blockade, and the small amount of publicity given to the Allied air raids in Germany.

On the other hand Germany specialized in attributing enormities to Russian, Serb, Italian, and Rumanian soldiers, as well as to Armenian bands. Against the French they were most fond of pushing charges that French soldiers murdered and mutilated German wounded, and shamefully maltreated German prisoners. Against the English similar charges were made; while British imperial history in Egypt, India, and South Africa was combed tendentiously to discover "atrocities." Against both British and French were directed innumerable charges of atrocity in connection with their use of colored colonial troops, although evidence is scarce that the latter fought in ways contrary to the Hague code of warfare.

The Germans were not successful in their use of atrocity stories. Several reasons can be advanced for this, but not lack of material. Who committed the most atrocities in fact was almost an irrelevant issue in such matters, if the publicity agents were sufficiently skillful. The real secret of the German defeat in this area lay in the refusal of the Supreme Command to take propaganda seriously enough and their military aversion to the inevitable admissions of vulnerability inherent in the use of atrocity stories.

CHAPTER VI

FRENCH DENUNCIATION

German writers have analyzed the use of atrocity stories by the French and concluded that the French by nature were the most "atrocity-loving" (greuelfreudig) of nations and that they attributed to others what they thought of doing themselves. Actually the Germans were quite as greuelfreudig as any other nation; nor should the important fact be overlooked that France was the country which suffered from the worst invasion. Under emotional pressure the more vivid vocabulary was to be expected.

In January, 1915, the French commission on atrocities published its first report. By the end of the year five such reports were published; others appeared intermittently until the twelfth and final publication issued during the peace conference in 1919. None of the succeeding reports contained anything like the atrocities described in the first report, which told of the sufferings of civilians in the first onrush of the German troops. Although not as severe an indictment of German methods as the Bryce Report, it was a sanguinary tale of cruelty and abnormalities. The other reports concentrated on such comparatively mild details as vandalism, looting, the use of gas, and harsh treatment meted out to prisoners.

In 1916 the great hue and cry in France over atrocities involved the deportations of French and Belgians from the occupied zones. The measures undertaken by Germany were ineffective and severe, but no actual atrocities seem to have been committed.

In 1917 and 1918 the French referred less and less to "atrocities," although the term flared up in connection with the devastation wreaked by the retreating German armies and the bombardment of Paris by the "Big Bertha." In the last month of the war the subject became again acute in France as retribution was debated.

CHAPTER VII

ENGLISH VITUPERATION

As in France the largest single category of propagandist books produced in England during the war was that of atrocities and breaches of international law by Germany. Between January and May, 1915, most of the English cries of atrocity were concerned with the bombing of England and the use of poison gas. Post-war statements of British experts indicate, however, that the German bombers usually had military objectives, and that the use of gas was not as inhumane as depicted at the time of its introduction in April, 1915.

The high point of English emphasis on atrocities came in May, 1915, when the Bryce Report was published, soon after the sinking of the "Lusitania." Filled with the most horrible kinds of atrocities, most of the Bryce Report has not been substantiated by later research. When one of the members of the Bryce committee wrote in 1927 that "in its broad findings the Report has not been and will not be overthrown," he may have meant that the Germans distinguished themselves in Belgium by the ruthless execution of civilians.

In October, 1916, two of the most celebrated atrocity stories of the war came into prominence: the shooting of Edith Cavell, and the Armenian massacres. In the former case, the Germans were legally justified, but made a grave political error in not according mercy to the English nurse. In the case of the Armenian massacres, the facts as established after the war seem quite as bad as the propaganda of the time. Only the accusation of German responsibility and complicity in the massacre was unfounded.

Following the furor raised over the Armenian atrocities came another lull. Although some notice was taken of official publications on "German outrages in Africa," and the "murder of Captain Fryatt" (an Englishman executed by the Germans for ramming a submarine), the period up until October, 1916, when the outcries against the Belgian deportations commenced, was marked by a relative dearth of material on atrocities in the English press.

In 1917 and 1918 the chief grievances concerning German atrocities centered around the activities of submarines, but Amer-

loan and British naval experts admitted (unofficially, to be sure) after the war that the German submarine campaign was justifiable according to international law "without stretching any more points than had been strained by the British in making rubber and food contraband." The same gentlemen insist that the German submarine commanders were as humane as the circumstances of warfare permitted.

These things were not known during the war, and had no effect on the state of mind prevailing in Allied countries at the conclusion of the armistice, when demands for the punishment of the German "criminals" went up on all sides. The result was the attempt to try the Kaiser and a multitude of other political and military leaders of Germany accused of having committed or caused or permitted atrocities.

CHAPTER VIII

THE DAY OF RECKONING

Atrocities or "war crimes" played a unique role at the peace conference of Paris and in the treaty of Versailles. The demand for the punishment of those responsible for atrocities was, according to Mr. Lloyd George, the only "fresh condition" imposed upon the defeated enemy after the armistice, and was the first problem attacked by the peace conference. It was the last important item inserted in the draft treaty by the Allies and the first part of the treaty to be nullified.

The American Secretary of State, Robert Lansing, was opposed to the idea of trying the so-called "war criminals," a procedure which he considered unwarranted by international law. He waged a long battle against the proposed trials in the "Commission on Responsibilities," of which he was chairman, and lost out only because Wilson conceded the point after Lloyd George and Clemenceau had yielded on others.

The last request of the Weimar Assembly was to have the "honor clauses" removed from the treaty. No such concession was made, but unofficial representatives of Poincaré and Clemenceau in Germany assured German leaders that they "must not think that the Kaiser and his generals would actually be treated as badly as they imagined."

Notwithstanding, one month after the treaty was ratified the Germans were handed a list of eight hundred and forty-six names of men to be tried as "war criminals." Lansing exerted himself to restrain the Allied demands. The list was ultimately cut down to twelve, who were tried in 1921 before the German Supreme Court at Leipzig. Six of the twelve were convicted and given light sentences up to imprisonment for four years.

The British observer and author of the best account of the trials considers that they were of a constructive nature and that short sentences, administered by German judges, were preferable to any, no matter how long, that might have been dispensed by Allied military tribunals. In an optimistic moment this Britisher ventured that Leipzig might have "great effect in establishing the supremacy of the ordinary law and in checking military arrogance."

CONCLUSION

The insistence upon "penalties" was inevitable. From the very beginning of the war a search had been instituted for the persons "guilty" of beginning the war and "responsible" for its attendant horrors. The governments of all countries involved found it expedient to promote belief in the propensity of the enemy to commit atrocities. Regular atrocity commissions functioned throughout the war in Belgium, France, England, Germany, Russia, Austria, Serbia, and Bulgaria.

There is a very present danger in the consideration of this question. Most of the "atrocities" were not fabricated. Most of them were very real. But neither side had clean hands. Just as both sides invented atrocities to ascribe to the enemy, so did both sides commit atrocities. The Allies, according to reliable witnesses, also "mopped up" wounded soldiers, bombed civilians, and starved little children. In fact, the Germans, as victors, would probably have exhibited quite as much vindictiveness as did the Allies; they had a suspiciously large collection of documents concerning atrocities ready at the end of 1918, on which they had been working for some time. Four years of war and propaganda had left peoples and politicians with open wounds that would not heal.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

For the general attitude during the war in the various countries toward atrocities the columns of the leading, semi-official newspaper in the capital have been culled, viz., the London Times, the Paris Temps, and the Berlin Norddeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung. In addition to those a number of other less official newspapers were consulted, especially for the crucial months of August, September, 1914, and January and May, 1915. Very valuable were also the various papers published for the soldiers at the front. Some illustrated magazines were used, but there was not quite as much emphasis on atrocities by picture as some accounts would lead one to believe.

The official attitude toward atrocities was reflected directly in the reports of the various governmental commissions. There are various ways of checking on these. One of the best is that of comparing the original report with that issued several years after the war. Internal evidence can also be used to show the inherent absurdity of some allegations. At other times it was possible to use other military reports to show that the original stories were unfounded, as was done by Duhr in his splendid study on such German legends, entitled, Der Lügengeist im Weltkrieg. It would have been interesting and enlightening to examine the original depositions forming the basis of the Bryce Report. These were to be available to scholars after the war, but have since disappeared from the British archives.

Official investigations were also checked against each other, and furnished many unwilling witnesses. Thus the German White Book of May, 1915, on the "Belgian People's War" contained some evidence that the German troops had shot women and children while executing "hostages." The results of the investigations instituted by the Reichstag after the war were also of value. Here were the most damaging admissions by the former German leaders as well as their best defense. One whole series of these investigations were devoted to Völkerrecht im Weltkrieg, consisting of seven volumes of testimony and other material on violations of international law by both sides during the war.

In addition to the above, the usual sources in a study of this kind were consulted, such as the Foreign Relations, Supplements of the Departments of State; the Daily Review of the Foreign Press issued by the General Staff and Department of Information in England; the Stenographische Berichte der Verhandlungen of the Reichstag; Hansard, etc.

Memoirs were often helpful in differentiating between an atrocity and an atrocity story, or in showing how convinced some were of atrocities, or of determining the nature of propaganda. Some of the most useful were those of Prince Max of Baden, General Charteris, Sir Edward Cook, Matthias Erzberger, Hugh Gibson, Lord Bertie, Lloyd George, Lord Riddell.

The most useful secondary works were those dealing with military history, international law, and specific episodes of the war taken up in the thesis. In the first category Crutwell's history of the war was frequently relied upon. The various books of J. M. Spaight on the laws of war provided some corrective to the rather one-sided history of international law in the world war by J. W. Garner. Gibson and Prendergast provided the best account of the German submarine war.

For the last chapter on the trial of the Kaiser and the "war criminals" interesting unpublished materials were found in the Lansing, Bliss, and Wilson Papers in the Library of Congress.

